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Senate Bars Lifetime Censorship

Acts to Delay Plan
For Six Months
By 56-to-34 Vote

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The Senate, in a sharp rebuff to President Reagan, voted last night to block the administration from carrying out its plans to impose a lifetime censorship system on government officials with access to especially sensitive information.

An amendment prohibiting implementation of the program for six months was added by a vote of 56 to 34 to a two-year \$6.4 billion State Department authorization bill. The bill, which was passed by voice vote and sent to a House-Senate conference, also would cut in half the basic U.S. contribution to the United Nations over the next four years.

Sponsored by Sens. Charles McC. Mathias Jr. (R-Md.) and Thomas F. Eagleton (D-Mo.), the amendment is aimed at a government-wide pre-publication review system for the speeches and writings of employees (and former employees) who have been cleared for so-called sensitive compartmented information (SCI).

Reagan ordered the restrictions last March as part of a controversial effort to crack down on unauthorized disclosures of classified information. The censorship system has been in effect for years at the CIA and the National Security Agency (NSA), but Reagan ordered its expansion to all other government agencies with SCI-cleared employees, including the White House, the State Department and the Pentagon.

The Mathias-Eagleton amendment would not affect pre-publication review programs at the CIA and the NSA.

Eagleton said expansion of the

system "would require tens of thousands of former government officials . . . to submit for pre-publication censorship a vast number of their writings on issues of vital public interest."

The lifetime obligation, he charged, "amounts to a flagrant and indefensible violation of the First Amendment."

Mathias said he was struck by "how little evidence there is that former officials have abused their trust by revealing classified information without authorization." He said he and some Senate colleagues had asked the State, Justice and Defense departments how often in the past five years former officials had made such revelations without permission.

"The Department of Justice told us it knew of no such incidents. The State Department told us the same thing," Mathias said. "Only the Defense Department had any record of such disclosures, and it had only one confirmed, and one unconfirmed, incident to report."

"This record of one or two incidents in five years hardly justifies a crash program which infringes on important free speech rights," he said.

A government spokesman said at a House hearing Wednesday that officials in various agencies already have started signing the new "SCI Non-disclosure Agreements." They constitute lifetime pledges to submit for review any writings or speeches which "purport to contain" any SCI information or other "information concerning intelligence activities, sources or methods," even if it has not been classified.

The General Accounting Office said the system would affect more than 100,000 federal employees.

Under the Mathias-Eagleton amendment, officials currently in the federal government apparently could still be obliged to submit to censorship. The amendment blocks censorship of officials only "after termination" of their employment. It does not affect administration plans to expand the use of lie detector tests.

Sens. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) and Jeremiah Denton (R-Ala.) suggested in floor debate that there was no need for the amendment at this point, but Mathias said he saw no other choice.